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## INNOCENCE AND POWER IN THE CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION

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**Editor's Note:** The following is the text of Dr. Burton L. Mack's address to a joint session of the Society for Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion during their March, 1989, regional meetings in Claremont, CA. Dr. James Hester, Secretary of the Pacific Coast Region of the Society for Biblical Literature, invited Dr. Mack to share some thoughts on his most recent publication, A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins.

Friends, it is high honor to be invited to address you. That, at any rate, was my first thought when Jim Hester asked if I would consider it. Naturally I said yes. Who would say no? Now, though, I am less sure about the wisdom of that agreement. That's because the work Jim wanted me to talk about was my Mark book, and that book, as it turned out, is a

bit unorthodox and testy for polite occasions with colleagues. What's worse, the part Jim wanted me to focus on was the conclusion where I offer some wild reflections on a Markan legacy in the twentieth century.

Now I do sometimes think of myself as living in the twentieth century. But that is hardly my area of expertise. I have found it much easier spending my time in the first century, voyeuristically, of course, if not vicariously. So in thinking about Jim's invitation, I have grown suspicious. There was a twinkle in his eye, I'm afraid. And that has registered considerable caution.

I took it that he wanted me to say how I had come to such a strange conclusion that the Markan legacy could still be discerned in what might be called American mentality. I did try to go back and unravel that personal history of thinking about things. But Sartre's counsel about discovering our projects in retrospect didn't help much. It put me in touch with such a convoluted trajectory that I found it difficult to straighten it all out. And besides, I knew that if I were you I would find the rehearsal quite boring.

I did, however, discover two moments that I thought worth sharing. I remember the consternation created by reading Robert Jewett's and John Lawrence's book, *The American Monomyth*. And I recall the morning when I read a guest editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* by Scott Johnson of Hunter College, entitled "'Star Wars' Trusts in our Innocence, Not our Nightmares." I can't say that either reading set me off to do more research in American Studies, which would surely have been the right thing to do. But each did make a plop when added to my witch's brew of ideas, and both eventually surfaced in the conclusion to the Mark book. So I decided to fish them out, hang them up for all to see, wet or dry, and offer some reflections on why each reading reminded me of the Markan portrayal of Jesus. I want to focus on the curious combination of innocence and power in Christian and American imagination.

According to Jewett and Lawrence, the American hero is super clean and possesses superior power. According to Mark, Jesus was super clean and possessed of superior power. The question is whether the hero and Christ are related.



Customarily, Christians, I think, keep the Christ and the American hero in separate compartments. Don't confuse the spirit of god with firepower. And don't confuse sinlessness with the hero's dedication to his call. White horses and silver bullets are one thing. Sacrificial lambs another. And let's not talk about purity and power in the same breath, either. Purity belongs to religion, and power to politics, and we know how important it is to keep those two apart. So let's just say that the Christ is the Christian's savior, and the popular hero a projection of the can-do of the people.

There may be much to commend that distinction. But the question is nagging nonetheless. What are innocence and power doing together in the characterizations of the hero and the Christ? Since I viewed Mark's portrayal of Jesus as distinctively Markan, and since I couldn't find that the Markan plot had ever been entirely erased, though submerged, of course, in the synoptic gospel and iconography of the church, I had to consider the possibility that Mark's Jesus was still alive and well in the recesses of the western imagination. As the editors of *Time* said, we want a robust Jesus, not a wimp.

So what I propose is a simple four-part reflection: first on the profile of the American popular hero; then, on the distinctively Markan view of Jesus; third, on the timeliness of an American cultural critique, and, finally, on the question of a Markan legacy in American apocalyptic mentality.

## The American Hero in Profile

In the first edition of the *Monomyth* (1977), Jewett and Lawrence traced the profile of the American hero from the popular novels of the late nineteenth century (such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [1868], *Buffalo Bill Cody* [1869], and *The Virginian* [1902]) through the radio serials of the '20s and '30s (the *Lone Ranger*, for example), the comics of the '40s (Superman, for instance), and the dime western, to *Playboy*, TV serials (with focus on *Star Trek*), and the cinema of apocalyptic in our own time (such as *Jaws*,



Earthquake, and Towering Inferno). Interwoven are vignettes from the daily life of American politics and articulation of American values by those who momentarily had the public's ear (and then its eye). In the second edition (1988), the list of examples was expanded by including chapters on "Saintly Shootists in a Pop Religion of Death" and "Monomythic Politics: From Star Wars to Olliemanina." As one can see, the list of American folkheros is difficult to place in a single category of fiction. It encompasses real life figures as well as fantastic creations and includes folkheros and film stars as well as presidents, from George Washington through Abraham Lincoln, the Roosevelts, Kennedy, and Reagan. (As an aside, it seems that Thomas Jefferson and his Bible did not make either the long or the short list.)

The scene is set in the wilderness, whether the dark eastern forests, the wild western expanse, the urban jungle, or the strange and frightening world of galactic adventure. The story opens on a small group of huddled humanity in trouble with some paradisiac vision. This is sometimes cast as the little house on the prairie, sometimes as an enchantment with the pristine beauty of the mountain man's terrain, and sometimes as an edenic party in or near some city, an enclave surrounded by the fright and ugliness of the rest of the world. They are there to find a life better than was possible in the tarnished civilizations they left behind. But they have no plan. The paradisiac vision is not working, and as for the city, the only model available for social construction, it is just the place where the worst evils always immediately cluster. So troubles come, whether in the form of coping with the wild without, or the sad discovery of conflicts within. Recourse to democratic institutions fails, trust in the law turns to suspicion, and the stage is set for the entrance of the hero.

The hero, for his part, arrives untarnished by the history of troubles. He is selfless, chaste, unencumbered by social entanglements. He is a loner, highly charged with confidence, skill, and impeccable perception. He is able to discern the root of the problem, to locate the source of evil, and give immediate chase. Fortunately for the outcome, the hero also has his hands on the latest technology of destruction. From guns to lasers, we can trust him to use his power for good, for the people's cause is right and the hero is pure. He is the incarnation of altruism, an essentially faceless figure, and even violence at his hands is therefore justified. His shots are



straight and his conscience clean.

To take but one well-know example, the good ship Enterprise of the series Star Trek is on a five year mission to explore the galaxy. The galaxy is the new frontier and the old westward-ho and shoot-out plot are accordingly transposed. Unbelievable power is in the hands of two incarnations of goodness, Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock (a sort of Adam III and Mr. Techne). There was an interdiction from the first against interference in any other culture happened upon, in keeping with the high purposes of the mission. And yet, as we all know, the captain and crew encounter an alien culture in every episode, put it to the test, find it wanting, and demand its transformation. Resistance ends in violence and the trekkies scream for more.

### The Markan Portrayal of Jesus

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus suddenly appears in the world with great authority. He is cleansed at the crossing from the wilderness to the land and filled with divine spirit. The spirit is his mark of purity and power. Immediately he announces a new order of things called the kingdom of god and then marches into the land to "teach", Mark says, what has to be done. Alas. The land is already occupied. He enters Galilee, then Capernaum, then the synagogue at Capernaum, only to find a man possessed of an unclean spirit. He casts it out. The people respond in amazement, saying that they had never seen anything like it before. It was, they said, a "new teaching", one that had "authority." Indeed. The term is *exousia*, the kind of authority the sovereigns have, the power to execute, to get things done. Purity, power, and a mission to rid the land of unclean spirits are all announced programmatically at the beginning of Mark's story. They are exactly the traits, cast here in mythic mode, that are characteristics of the American folkhero. Robert Jewett, in another book on the theme, calls the American folkhero "Captain America." Mark calls Jesus the Christ-King.

To strike the comparison just in this way is, I know, a bit unusual. Nevertheless, when viewed together, Jesus does suddenly look like a captain with a gun, zapping resident aliens that obstruct his mission. The unclean spirit cries out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?



Have you come to destroy us?" The answer is clearly "Yes, indeed." The people respond by saying, "What is this? With authority he commands even the unclean spirits." They are fascinated because of the unbelievable concentration of power and purity in the person of Jesus.

Now I want to emphasize that this depiction is Mark's own fiction. Such a programmatic picture is not present in the Pauline tradition, nor in Q, the Gospel of Thomas, or the pre-Markan pronouncement stories. It is also not the picture of Jesus preferred by Matthew or Luke who worked very hard to tone Mark down. It was Mark who created the overly dramatic role of Jesus' appearance in purity and power. That can be shown.

Briefly, Mark took the sign of power implicit in the miracle stories and displayed it as the exponent of purity in a cosmic battle between good and evil. He therefore preferred exorcisms over healings, for they could be used to define Jesus' exercise of power as legitimate, that is, pure, setting up the contrast between unclean spirits and the holy spirit that was upon him. Mark then combined this notion of power with that of Jesus' authority taken from the pronouncement stories where Jesus always had the last word. The combination of miracle story genre with the pronouncement story is absolute and programmatic in the first action of Jesus in the synagogue at Capernaum, and in the first set of stories in Mark 2:1 - 3:6. In this set of five incidents, Jesus encounters the bad guys and exhibits his power and purity. His weapon is now his word, and the leaders in league with the city make the point by charging him with blasphemy.

One can trace the escalation of this conflict in the design of the first five stories and then throughout the gospel. In the story of Jesus' first appearance in the synagogue (Mk 1:21-28), the scribes are not present, but they are mentioned by the people as those whose authority was not like that of Jesus. At the healing of the paralytic (Mk 2:1-12), the scribes are present and murmur about blasphemy. In the next story about eating with tax collectors and sinners, the detractors are identified as the "scribes and the Pharisees" and are brought to silence (Mk 2:15-17). The Pharisees question the disciples in the next story about fasting (Mk 2:18-22), then finally address a question to Jesus himself in the story about plucking



grain on the Sabbath (Mk 2:23-28). In the last story of the set, another combination of miracle and pronouncement story, Jesus directly confronts the Pharisees with his program and the Markan plot is set. The Pharisees go out to hold "counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him" (Mk 3:1-6). From that point on, various combinations show up from time to time in order to track the narrative theme of the plot to its conclusion.

That the man of power gets killed has always been seen as the problem of Mark's gospel. Such a view, however, overlooks several points. One is that the story time does not end with the plotted time, to use Norman Petersen's terminology. The story will end in an apocalyptic reversal when the son of man and the kingdom finally come with power. This was achieved by setting the gospel story in the larger context of an apocalyptic view of history. Another is that the crucifixion is viewed as a violence perpetrated in the city that thereby seals its own destruction. This was achieved by relating the crucifixion of Jesus to the destruction of the temple and casting both as the first two battles in an elongated apocalyptic scenario. And the third is that Jesus is portrayed in the passion narrative as the innocent victim of the first precipitating encounter. This was achieved by studied allusion to the old story of the righteous one who is persecuted unjustly.

If we place Mark in the 70s of the first century, and do a bit of social sleuthing to determine the troubles faced by the Jesus movement for whom he wrote, the strategy is clear. Mark entertained an apocalyptic imagination of the world in order to salvage a social experiment in trouble. The mythic frame was compensation for a social program that did not materialize and a founder figure who should have taken the world by storm, but did not. Not yet.

## The Critique of a Christian Culture

The Markan legacy in Christian and American imagination cannot be traced either to an institutional selection of Mark's gospel for privileged reading, or to a popular fascination with the Markan version of the gospel story as such. The suspicion of a Markan legacy is based, rather,



on observations of another kind: First, that the Markan plot remains fundamental to the synoptic gospels and to the synoptic imagination of the gospel; second, that the synoptic gospel serves as the charter story for Christianity; third, that in times of social change throughout the history of western culture, messianic and apocalyptic scenarios of the Markan kind tend to resurface as scripts and rationalizations; and fourth, that the pattern of the American popular hero, as well as of American heroics, bears a striking resemblance to the picture of the Christ painted by Mark. The question is whether more can be said.

We have learned to be cautious when thinking about the ways in which religions, cultures, and societies work their magic in the collective, human enterprise. We have become especially sensitive to the problem of isolating functional relations among the many systems of signs that intertwine in the construction of any human society. And especially in the case of questioning mythologies, the old bug-a-boos still haunt us: myth and ritual; myth and myth-making; myth and symbol system; and, above all, myth and patterns of social behavior. We simply don't know yet how to demonstrate the difference a myth makes. So I shouldn't rush in where scholars fear to tread.

And yet, we've also learned that myths may be very important, that they seem to provide patterns of perception, images with which to think things through, accounts that define social histories and identities, and yes, in some cases, scripts for reenactments. We also know that shifts in characterization and rearrangements of mythic and popular plots can occur in the course of changing social histories. And we do take seriously studies that explore the sometimes congruous, sometimes incongruent, relations between a culture's mythology and its patterns of practice. Here I need only recall works by Levi-Strauss, Georg Dumezil, Louis Dumont, Pierre Bourdieu, Mary Douglas, Jonathan Z. Smith, Roy Rappaport, Michael Taussig, and Robert Darnton, to name a few.

So we needn't foreclose too quickly on the question of a Markan legacy in American imagination. As for the possibility of describing that imagination or, as the French would say, mentality, social historians and literary critics are busily engaged with just such analyses of our culture. We do know something about the American dream, the habits of the



heart, the roots of prejudice, our sense of mission, and our particular system of values. Many of these and other expressions of American culture have traits that betray what biblical scholars would recognize as a Christian reading of the biblical tradition. Perhaps I could mention some common images and clichés: the founding fathers and the quest for religious freedom, the exodus motif and the promised land, manifest destiny, the wilderness theme, the notion of the righteous nation, and the city set on a hill. We could also point to the perennial struggle between church and state and, more recently, the agony over asylum, prayer in the schools, and creationism. There is also our own brand of the holy war (which we prefer to call righteous or just), our various missions to the rest of the world, the sense of right, held to be self-evident, when interfering in the internal affairs of other peoples, and the culture shock when we did not win in Viet Nam.

What a focus on Mark might help us see is the fundamental cluster of notions at the core of the Christian charter. Secularized, to use that term for the transposition of Christian imagination to cultural mentality, a study of Mark may help us understand the logic implicit in the desire to see power and purity merged in a single feature. It might also help us discern something of the rationale for violence in our culture, politics, and patterns of social behavior, as well as the penchant for apocalyptic projections when caught in crisis or defeat. It is, in any case, the Gospel of Mark that came to mind as I read Scott Johnson's editorial.

### **The American Hero and Apocalyptic Imagination**

"The image of American innocence," Johnson wrote, "is central to our country's consciousness. It is the leitmotif of Aaron Copeland's *Appalachian Spring* and George Gershwin's *An American in Paris*. It tints the primitive landscapes of Grandma Moses and the folksy allegories of Norman Rockwell." He mentions other examples, and then quotes Niebuhr. "We are in our own eyes," Niebuhr says, "the most innocent nation on earth."

"This sense of our own innocence," Johnson continues, "is coupled



with messianic visions of our role in history: the revolutionary redeemers of a Europe corrupted by kings, the blessed heirs of destiny made manifest, the all-bearing defenders of a Free World at any price. We are the new refuge of an Old World's huddled masses, the liberators of two world wars, the rebuilders of a war-torn Europe", and so on. He then shares a troubling insight.

"Even our failures," he says, "such as Beirut or Southeast Asia, seem merely to persuade us that, like all messiahs, we may be at times too good, too eager with our help, and so become the victim of an undeserving or ungrateful world. In one sense this may be a lesson that we believe we have learned from Viet Nam, and justifies our increasing impatience with those who -- UNESCO or New Zealand, for example -- appear not to appreciate the goodness of our works." He then suggests that we have not really learned the lesson we should: "It is clearly this conception of ourselves as humankind's white-hatted saviour that President Reagan drew upon ... when he revealed his plan for what was later named the Strategic Defense Initiative. 'My fellow Americans,' he announced, 'tonight we are launching an effort which holds the purpose of changing the course of human history.'" Johnson calls this "a declaration laden with messianic intent."

"Even beyond the President's stated purpose," he says, "it is obvious that visions such as Star Wars require what the 17th century's George Alsop called the 'Adamitical' image of America for their base. For no one contemplates wielding ultimate power, as the ability to render nuclear missiles 'impotent and obsolete' surely is meant to be, unless he sees himself as pure enough to draw out of the stone the sword denied the older, tainted warriors of the world."

"But such a purity," Johnson continues, "as with Arthur's legend itself, exists only in myth, and that is the most serious danger of Star Wars -- that in it we may mistake our images for reality. We may too readily believe, as we have imagined in the past, that it is virtually our birthright to hold powers unmatched. We may convince ourselves as we have done so dangerously before that it is our real purpose in the world to save humanity, and that our nature is too peaceful, our character too good, to ever be the source of tragedy."



We need not rehearse the litany of tragedies Johnson then asks us to recall, for we all have done so already time after time. But we should take note of his conclusion: "Dreams of innocence die hard, but always finally die," he says. "King Arthur's stainless Camelot ends on a blood-soaked battlefield, without a breath of victory or life. The dying king, ringed by corpses, learns as we one day may that there are no human messiahs, no innocent souls. Wise at his death, he orders Bedivere, the lone survivor of the carnage, to throw Arthur's Excalibur, the 'invincible' weapon that in the end saves not a soul, back to the Lady of the Lake, beyond the dangerous grasps of men. Bedivere hesitates, but finally heaves the sword into the waves. It is an act, if we are wise, to imitate."

I should probably leave it there, for the point of comparison is surely scored in the reading. But I know that the comparison is not a demonstration. And I realize that the correspondences are not exact. Mark's Christ dies in a mission that first fails; the American hero has to win. Failure in the American story signals the loss of our innocence and power; in Mark's story, the crucifixion vindicates Jesus' innocence and power. The American story justifies the dominant culture; Mark's story justifies a powerless movement. So how can both stories be related at all?

What if we noticed that Mark part I and Mark part II are separable scenarios that can shift into prominent focus with changing social histories? The difference in the reading and the focus might match the collective judgment on how the nation stands with respect to the kingdom of god. But note, please, that each scenario offers only a partial perspective on the larger story world that connects them. That larger story world is an apocalyptic view of history. The apocalyptic moment, for its part, also can shift its correlation with social history, depending on the nation's perception of its purity and power. For much of our history, America has cultivated a millennial mentality as if, in this land and people, the kingdom has come, is coming in power. Recently, however, the apocalyptic vision has been relocated again into the future. It is when that happens, I suggest, that the tragic, anti-hero scenario of Mark part II finds its fascination.

Johnson has seen the essential point quite clearly: "Even our



failures ... seem merely to persuade us that, like all messiahs (we might ask which all), we may be at times too good, too eager with our help, and so become the victim of an undeserving or ungrateful world." That, I take it, is the other side of the danger Johnson sees in the myth of our innocence. Note that, in the shift to an apocalyptic frame for either a reading of the gospel or a reimagination of the hero, the sign of failure and the sign of victory are identical. The sign is a violent destruction in which victim and victor are simply factors of opposition in an equation of double inversion. The inversions depend on how one assigns the values of innocence and power. Thus, both martyrdom and the destruction of the enemy can vindicate the righteous cause. With such a symbol imagined at the beginning of the Christian era, and such a sign projected into the future or our eventual vindication, we win either way, violence notwithstanding, as long as we manage the fiction of the man, our man of innocence and power. It is the concentration of innocence and power in a single figure, I think, that marks our mythological mentality, and signals to the world our danger.

I leave it there for your deliberation and judgment.

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